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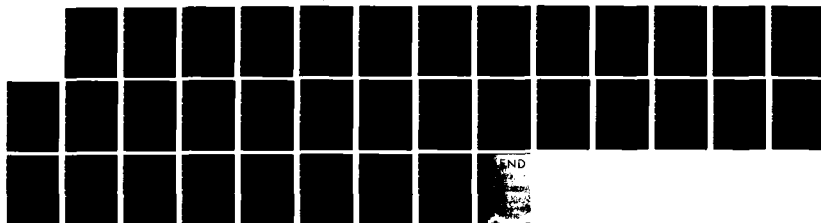
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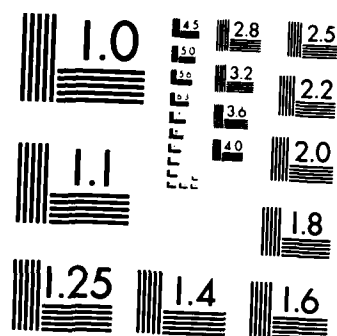
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Jonathan D. Pollack

January 1984

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## CHINA AND THE GLOBAL STRATEGIC BALANCE\*

Jonathan D. Pollack

January 1984

### INTRODUCTION

Among the factors influencing Chinese foreign relations, China's relationship to the global strategic balance has always been pivotal. For better or for worse, the postwar world continues to be dominated by the power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. By any reasonable measure--economic capabilities, conventional military strength and reach, or their enormous nuclear arsenals--the United States and the Soviet Union remain great powers distinct from all others, with a unique capability to affect war and peace in the international system.

China's leaders profess considerable distaste for this state of affairs. They assert that the politics of "superpower hegemonism" offer neither understanding of nor solutions for the long-term problems and crises of international politics. Indeed, the Chinese view the Soviet-American rivalry as a relic of history, to be supplanted ultimately by a more egalitarian, far less coercive international order. Despite China's self-characterization as a Third World state and its long-standing critique of the domination of international politics by a few great powers, the Chinese have few illusions about the workings of the contemporary international system. They recognize that they must function within the existing international system, even if they insist that their actions and objectives are intended to transform global politics. For China, there is no escape from either the Soviet-American rivalry or the attendant conflicts that have made Asia the major battleground of the post-war era.

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\*This essay will also appear in Harry Harding, ed., *China's Foreign Relations in the 1980s*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984.

Where does China fit within the global strategic balance, both historically and at present? How important is China in the global power equation? Is China likely to possess sufficient power and standing to affect significantly the future of the strategic balance and, if so, in what ways? Do the other major powers view China's role in the same way that leaders in Peking do? And how will China's growing involvement in the international strategic system alter the beliefs and practices espoused by leaders in Peking?

To assess these questions, this essay will explore three interrelated themes: First, China's shifting relationship to the Soviet-American power balance since 1949; second, the basic patterns in contemporary Sino-American relations and Sino-Soviet relations, as they contribute to defining China's global role; and third, China's importance in the contemporary international system, as perceived by China and by other major powers. ~~We will then draw~~ some general conclusions about the likely evolution of the global strategic balance through the remainder of the 1980s.

## CHINA IN THE POSTWAR WORLD

With the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party had to take on the task of defining an international position and direction for their country. The CCP was no longer a revolutionary movement whose political and military horizons were bounded by China's geographical limits. It not only had to consolidate its political, economic, and administrative power within China, but it had to identify and work toward an international role congruent with both China's power and security objectives and the constraints imposed by the actions of others.

As the principal architect of Chinese security strategy, Mao Zedong clearly understood that his preeminent foreign policy objective was to diminish China's vulnerability to external power and military pressure. Since the United States and Soviet Union were the predominant military powers in the postwar world, China's relationship to the two superpowers constituted the central question for the security of China. In the broadest of terms, therefore, Mao offered three general maxims for

Chinese security: (1) identify the principal political and military threat to China, and do not allow China to be embroiled in conflicts of less than vital interest; (2) whenever possible, avoid international isolation or outright confrontation with one or both superpowers; and (3) lean toward the less threatening and more helpful of the two superpowers, but never in irrevocable fashion. All three maxims offered sound general principles, but there has frequently been a divergence between theory and practice. In several key instances, Mao did not heed his own advice, especially in periods when the debate about security became deeply enmeshed in domestic political conflict. On other occasions, Soviet and American leaders did not always act as China's leaders anticipated or hoped. Reviewing the successes and failures of Chinese foreign policy over the past three-and-one-half decades enables us to see more clearly both the strengths and limits of China's power position and approach to global strategy.

As noted earlier, China's search for security was qualitatively different from the CCP's revolutionary experiences. As one nation in a world of sovereign states, China experienced a significant reduction in its freedom of action and room for maneuver. Even more important, the PRC was severely disadvantaged in relation to the structure of world power the Chinese leadership confronted in 1949. By the time of the Chinese Communist Party's victory over the Kuomintang, the international system had undergone a major ideological, political, and military polarization. The Soviet-American wartime alliance had been supplanted by a stark political, ideological, and military confrontation in Europe, with the European nations now playing a subsidiary role in the broader Soviet-American competition. An event as dramatic as the CCP triumph thus assumed global significance, all the more in view of China's adherence to Marxism-Leninism.

Even if the PRC leadership had wished to insulate itself from the Soviet-American rivalry, circumstances did not permit such detachment. The consolidation of Communist rule on the Chinese mainland virtually guaranteed that the Cold War would extend to Asia as well as Europe. The United States, having long sought to infuse the Nationalist

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government with at least symbolic standing as a major world power, now sought to deny the legitimacy of the new Chinese government through political, economic, and military means, and to impede the PRC's territorial consolidation and economic rehabilitation. At the same time, the United States was increasingly committed to a renascent Japan closely aligned with U.S. political and strategic goals in the Pacific. A confrontation with American power in East Asia ill served China's long-term interests, but the ingredients for such a confrontation were all too evident in the fall of 1949.

Thus, China was severely disadvantaged in relation to American power. The Soviet Union had rapidly consolidated its control of Eastern Europe, enabling Moscow to compete against the United States with a series of buffer states to the west. China had no such geographic advantage. In dire economic circumstances and highly vulnerable to American power, China therefore recognized the imperative need to seek at least a partial accommodation with the Soviet Union.

In critical respects, the Sino-Soviet alliance of early 1950 represented a marriage of convenience. Yet it is doubtful whether any Chinese leaders--including Mao--saw any reasonable alternative. China and the USSR shared both a long border and (at least nominally) a common ideology. The achievement of correct if not wholly intimate interstate relations with the Soviet Union was a vital need for the Chinese, if only to avoid the nightmarish vision of hostile relations with both Moscow and Washington. Although excessive dependence on the Soviet Union was hardly desirable, the potential gains for Chinese security and economic needs far outweighed the risks.

The consummation of the Moscow-Peking alliance further abetted the stark polarization of the international system. Some of the dangers inherent in such a situation rapidly became evident, as the onset of the Korean conflict in June 1950 brought American military power to China's northeastern doorstep, compelling the PRC's intervention on behalf of North Korea. The PRC thus found itself on the front lines of a major military conflict. China's vulnerability to external power had now been accentuated rather than diminished.



Thus, the role of junior partner in the Sino-Soviet alliance entailed costs as well as gains. In the Korean War, the PRC bore the brunt of the responsibility for assisting North Korea. It suffered major losses in combat and had to defer key parts of its internal economic rehabilitation program. The conflict further heightened China's dependence upon the Soviet Union for both military and economic aid. The Soviets, although forthcoming in their assistance, exacted a high price: China was fully incorporated into the socialist camp, with virtually no opportunity for serious economic or political dealings with the major non-Communist powers. U.S. policy further abetted these circumstances. The United States, regarding the PRC as a major adversary, imposed a full economic blockade against Peking, ringed China with a series of military bases, and provided the rival Nationalist government on Taiwan with vital economic and military aid. Thus, the Chinese experienced the worst of both worlds: political domination by their more powerful and developed ally and isolation and encirclement imposed by the world's leading military power.

As early as the mid-1950s, China tried to break out of these unappealing circumstances. As the immediate American military threat eased in the wake of the truces in Korea and Indochina, the PRC initiated a direct dialogue with the United States through ambassadorial discussions in Geneva and subsequently in Warsaw. At the same time, the post-Stalin power struggle in the Soviet leadership afforded the Chinese new leverage in their dealings with the USSR. China was therefore able to embark on a more independent foreign policy, seeking to build friendly relations with some of its noncommunist neighbors in Asia.

By the late 1950s, the Chinese (and Mao in particular) went a step further, actively seeking to redefine their alliance relationship with the Soviets, as part of a larger effort to diminish Moscow's influence in Chinese affairs. In Mao's view, the Soviet leaders (especially Khrushchev) were not only seeking to control China. Khrushchev's interest in peaceful coexistence with the West also offered clearcut evidence of Soviet and American collusion at the expense of Chinese interests. Under these circumstances, China began to take public issue with Soviet policy, which in Mao's view consigned China to subordinate

status in both global and Asian politics. Equally important, China initiated a major effort to develop its own nuclear weapons, since an independent nuclear deterrent was essential for China to guarantee its own security.

China's effort to forge an independent foreign policy was still frustrated by U.S. policy toward the PRC. Peking could not define a more symmetrical position in relation to Washington and Moscow as long as the United States continued to view China as a threat to global peace and stability equal to or greater than the USSR. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States judged China to be the principal source of "revolutionary Communist expansionism"--a view made more understandable by Peking's strident attacks on "Soviet revisionism" and Moscow's alleged "capitulation to U.S. imperialism's global counterrevolutionary strategy."<sup>1</sup> Despite the mounting evidence of Sino-Soviet estrangement over ideology and foreign policy, the United States failed to exploit the political and diplomatic opportunities inherent in such circumstances. Indeed, the perception of a common American and Soviet interest in forestalling the further spread of nuclear weaponry--with China as the obvious candidate--led Washington to pursue common ground with Moscow in the field of arms control, to the detriment of Chinese interests. Peking, therefore, acted in defiance of both superpowers, even if this posture entailed additional risks to China's security and economic well-being.

Peking's defiance was fueled by Chinese internal politics. Mao was not only defying Moscow in international affairs; he was also trying to purge the CCP of those opposed to an increasing radicalization that would subsequently lead to the xenophobia and convulsion of the Cultural Revolution. In a marked departure from a decade-long effort to forge expanded relations abroad, China increasingly withdrew from both diplomatic and foreign policy involvement, leaving itself isolated and vulnerable in the midst of domestic turmoil and violence.

At the same time U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam conflict began to grow appreciably. Many predicted that the growing military

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<sup>1</sup>See, in particular, *Two Different Lines on the Question of War and Peace: Comment on the Open Letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU (V)*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, November 19, 1963.

tensions in Southeast Asia would mute the Sino-Soviet conflict, and draw Peking and Moscow closer together. But Mao publicly rejected the calls of Khrushchev's successors for Sino-Soviet joint action to oppose the United States in Vietnam; in spirit if not in letter, the Sino-Soviet alliance was now dead. China assisted Vietnam on its own--even as it warily allowed the shipment of Soviet military aid through China--but conveyed to the United States that it wished to avoid a wider Sino-American conflict. In the eyes of the Chinese strategists, America's Vietnam involvement was from the outset doomed to failure. In a region of marginal strategic value to U.S. interests, the United States could only grow more enmeshed in a quagmire in which there were no reasonable limits, nor was there any easy means of extrication.

Such an evaluation was vindicated in the remainder of the 1960s and in the early 1970s. As a result, however, the Soviet Union steadily augmented its military power, without provoking serious American reactions. Even worse for Chinese interests, much of this growth in Soviet power occurred on China's northern doorstep. Soviet alarm over Cultural Revolution xenophobia--exacerbated by Mao's references to Chinese territory that had been seized by the czars and was still held by the Soviets--led Moscow to upgrade its defenses along heretofore thinly manned borders opposite China. Peking's worst strategic nightmare was coming to pass: China, convulsed in internal disarray without credible allies or even powerful friends, faced acute political and military pressure on separate geographic fronts from both superpowers.

But the Chinese themselves were largely responsible for these inauspicious developments. The "plague on both your houses" mentality then evident in Chinese foreign policy had led to severe isolation, internal dislocation, and a societal vulnerability all too tempting to external adversaries. China was far weaker than either the United States or the USSR, yet Peking's internal and external course alienated and affronted both superpowers and precluded effective collaboration with either. All three of Mao's cardinal rules of international strategy were being neglected; the internal disarray evident in the Cultural Revolution had spread throughout the Chinese political process, including foreign policy.

The full implications of China's isolation and vulnerability began to be felt in the late 1960s. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and a series of bloody clashes along the Sino-Soviet border in 1969 made abundantly clear that Peking faced a major Soviet military challenge to its north. Sino-Soviet differences had now been fully transformed from a war of words and ideas into a potential war with guns. China therefore had to put its domestic house in order as well as make a series of difficult but critical choices in its foreign policy strategy. Overtures from Peking to the newly elected Nixon administration were answered: both states were prepared to enter into political dealings for mutual advantage, culminating in the Nixon visit to China in February 1972.

Thus, China's long-sought independence and leverage had finally been achieved, but only after a period of acute internal and external crisis. This included the death and political disgrace of Defense Minister Lin Biao, Mao's constitutionally designated successor. Lin was the apparent architect of China's "dual adversary" strategy toward both superpowers and, not accidentally, the major political beneficiary of China's convulsive course at home and abroad. Both Mao and Zhou Enlai had increasingly realized the acute danger of China continuing to function as the odd nation out in the U.S.-Soviet-Chinese relationship.

Mao and Zhou's overtures to the United States reflected classic unsentimental balance-of-power calculations and bore little relation to the ideological pronouncements that Peking had held dear for much of the 1960s. A posture of informal alignment with the United States would permit China to have vital breathing space at a time of acute Chinese vulnerability. It could thus seek to deter any further escalation of Sino-Soviet hostilities to the north, as it progressively eased tensions with the United States to the east and the south. In fact if not in name, Peking was willing to form a security alignment with Washington, even as the United States was still trying to salvage a political victory in Vietnam against China's erstwhile socialist ally.

In grasping such opportunities, the Nixon Administration not only capitalized on the possibilities inherent in the Sino-Soviet conflict since the late 1950s; it also accorded China an independent strategic

value within the global balance of power. Although the Chinese from the first realized that the U.S. agenda in forging ties with Peking differed from their own, this did not diminish the fact that the new Sino-American relationship also marked the realization of China's long-sought strategic objective. Not only could China seek to parlay its relationship with the United States into more effective opposition to the growth of Soviet power in Asia. What is more, the American connection also accorded Peking unparalleled international stature and legitimacy in both the socialist and capitalist world. It is little wonder, therefore, that Mao's role in creating this "revolutionary line in foreign affairs" remains among the few areas where the late Chairman's role in Chinese politics remains largely sacrosanct.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the full logic of a triangular world had finally emerged. Before the late 1960s, China had yet to gain full acceptance as an accredited major power acknowledged by both Washington and Moscow. Until the United States as well as the Soviet Union were prepared to confer such stature, China could not and did not play an international role commensurate with its size, power potential, and centrality in postwar East Asia. Neither state, to be sure, had been able to ignore Chinese power. The United States had fought a war with the Chinese in Korea, and for two decades had deployed substantial military forces both to contain and to deter China from undertaking any provocative international actions. The Soviet Union, for its part, now found itself committing substantial military forces to a potential conflict with the PRC. With the growing accommodation between the United States and China, however, a new stage had been reached: Both global powers now had to weigh the implications of their actions toward China against the effect of these actions on their relations with each other.

For the Chinese, their long-sought international legitimacy was a major political breakthrough, especially in view of China's vulnerabilities at the close of the 1960s. However, full triangularity created problems as well as opportunities. China had long condemned the

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<sup>2</sup>For the fullest official exposition of Mao's foreign policy doctrines, see Editorial Department of *People's Daily*, "Chairman Mao's Theory of the Differentiation of the Three Worlds Is a Major Contribution to Marxism-Leninism," *Renmin Ribao*, November 1, 1977, trans. in *Peking Review*, No. 45, November 4, 1977, pp. 10-45.

"hegemonism of big power politics," yet it benefited by the inclusion of a China factor in the Soviet-American global rivalry. Even as the Chinese continued to criticize both the Soviet Union and the United States for their global ambitions, Peking clearly stood to gain from antagonism between the two superpowers. A sounder relationship with the United States permitted China to deflect Soviet political and military pressure directed against it--provided that Peking's ties with Washington tempered rather than provoked Moscow. At the same time, China did not want to risk embroilment in any Soviet-American confrontation. China, in effect, could gain from superpower rivalry, even from a degree of tension, but not from an overly antagonistic Soviet-American relationship that verged on major crisis.

As a consequence, the Chinese leadership needed to weigh carefully not only its own interests in Sino-American relations but also how it perceived American interests and strategies toward both China and the Soviet Union. In this regard, Peking was persuaded that the United States at long last intended to disengage from Vietnam, and in other respects would curtail U.S. military activity in the Western Pacific. In addition, to the extent that the United States pursued better relations with both Peking and Moscow, new pressures would be placed on Hanoi to negotiate with Washington. Yet the Chinese also understood that the Nixon administration gained additional leverage in its dealings with the Soviet Union by enjoying high level access to leaders in Peking. The United States, in effect, could trade on its improving relations with Peking to elicit greater responsiveness from Moscow on matters of vital interest to superpower relations, most notably agreements on strategic arms control as well as a negotiated peace in Vietnam.

Thus, triangularity posed an additional risk for the Chinese: that the United States would simply seek to parlay its ties with Peking into improved ties with the Soviet Union. China's experience in the Sino-Soviet alliance had been a sobering one. Peking would never again permit excessive dependence on an outside power, let alone cede any of its sovereign political prerogatives. China's acute vulnerability to Soviet power made partial accommodation with Washington a compelling political and security need, but the Chinese did not want to become a

vehicle for larger American strategic designs. The improvement in Sino-American ties did persuade the Chinese that they would not fall prey to Soviet-American collusion at their expense, yet Peking also recognized that Soviet-American relations (with the exception of the Vietnam issue) had a distinct and different agenda from U.S.-Chinese ties. Above all, China did not wish either the Soviet Union or the United States to perceive Peking as an appendage of American power, since that created the worrisome probability that China (and Chinese interests) could be taken for granted--a direct contradiction of the principles of triangularity.

Many of these dilemmas and difficulties became more apparent over the remainder of the 1970s. Despite the clear gains for Chinese security early in the decade, the Chinese continued to witness the steady augmentation of Soviet capabilities and the further retrenchment of U.S. power, especially in Asia. By mid-decade, Peking increasingly feared that Washington was dealing with China only to gain leverage in arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union, the results of which were judged detrimental to Chinese interests. Not only was China being taken for granted; a string of Soviet successes in the Third World had gone unanswered by the West. The U.S. defeat in Vietnam further fueled China's anxieties. Some Chinese saw an ominous geopolitical momentum to these developments, with Moscow supplanting the United States as the world's leading power. The United States, in the view of many Chinese observers, was now a defensive and even passive power, and some in Peking questioned whether the United States was still enough of a superpower to be a credible partner for China.

Peking's concerns went beyond patterns of political and military alignment. In the wake of Mao's death and the ouster of China's radical leadership, China's leadership began to recognize the depths of the PRC's internal problems. China was in urgent need of technological assistance from abroad to tackle long-deferred tasks in economic development. Two decades of internal conflict found China lagging even farther behind in education, science and technology, basic economic development, and military power. The pervasiveness of the Soviet political and military challenge in Asia--driven home by growing Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration to oppose China--made imperative the

search for new sources of technological, economic, and even security assistance.

The only possible source for such aid was the West and Japan. As a result, China increasingly argued that the Soviet strategic challenge was so pervasive and threatening that the PRC could no longer equivocate about ties with the United States and the other major Western powers. Joint collaborative efforts were thus required "to frustrate the war schemes of the Soviet hegemonists."<sup>3</sup> Peking seemed closer to an explicit security relationship with one of the superpowers than at any time since the highpoint of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the 1950s. The normalization of Sino-American relations at the end of 1978, followed immediately by China's border war against Vietnam and some months later by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, portended a stark repolarization of Asian international politics.

Thus, the dramatic improvement in Sino-American relations at the end of the 1970s was based on a conjunction of internal and external needs. It reflected not only heightened Chinese anxieties about Soviet political and military encirclement, but also the ascendance of leaders in Peking (in particular Deng Xiaoping) who were prepared to cement ties with the West. Deng judged a united front strategy against Moscow as the most credible, effective way to prevent further Soviet geopolitical gains in Asia. To the extent that Deng could persuade leaders abroad that China was almost reflexively opposed to any Soviet political or military actions, China could expect the United States and other Western powers to provide assistance vital to China's modernization effort.

At the same time, Deng understood a concomitant need not to provoke Moscow or exacerbate Sino-Soviet tensions. Notwithstanding the somewhat extravagant flavor of China's united front rhetoric, Peking did not seek a major confrontation with Soviet military power, least of all along the Sino-Soviet border. Nor did the Chinese want to see U.S.-Soviet tensions escalate to an acute level, especially if this threatened to involve China, as well. The goal of a security alignment with the West

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<sup>3</sup>For an authoritative defense of China's united front strategy with the United States, see *Red Flag Commentator*, "The Plotter of a Siege Is Being Besieged," *Hongqi*, No. 11, November 1978, trans. in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report--People's Republic of China*, November 29, 1978, pp. A9-13.



was to deter Moscow, not provoke it. While the Chinese leadership refrained from forging any formal security relations with the United States, they did conclude that informal security ties could serve as a tacit signal to Moscow that China was considering the option of leaning further toward the West in the event of undiminished Soviet pressure against China.

China's most compelling needs, however, were in the area of national economic development. China's modernization prospects hinged on several key considerations: (1) diminishing direct Soviet pressure against China, thereby making defense needs less imperative; (2) devising a credible, consistent basis for heightened economic and technological exchanges with the West; and (3) creating a stable and peaceful international environment that would be congruent with orderly economic development. All three factors reflected a dramatic departure in Chinese economic strategy from the previous emphasis on voluntarism and domestic mobilization and toward a more orderly pursuit of development goals. Thus, a united front strategy posed risks as well as potential gains. If China's preeminent interest was in a peaceful international environment, excessive polarization between China and the West, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union, on the other, could easily undermine such a goal. There was no firm guarantee that both China and the United States shared a common viewpoint on the best means of restraining Soviet power. It remained for the two countries to define a common set of assumptions about the character and objectives of their security dealings that would also be comprehensible to leaders in Moscow.

By the close of the 1970s, however, many of China's key political and strategic objectives had been achieved. The contrast with Peking's political and military environment at the outset of the decade was palpable. Though still subject to severe military pressure and efforts at encirclement, China was no longer isolated internationally. With increasingly diversified economic ties, it could use the prospect of its untapped economic potential to induce broadened trade and technology purchases from the West. And, though lagging severely behind its major military rival, China did not face the likely prospect of serious military conflict, except along the Sino-Vietnamese border. The

goal was to use these latent possibilities to China's overall advantage, hoping ultimately to redefine China's long-term relationship with both superpowers.

#### CHINA AND THE SUPERPOWERS IN THE 1980S: A DELICATE BALANCE?

As a result of its emergence into the international arena in the latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s, the PRC is now more engaged in global politics than at any previous time in its history. Yet the character of China's international dealings, including its relations with the two superpowers, still remains unsettled. China's accustomed position in relation to the Soviet-American power balance has been that of the vulnerable, encircled, perpetually threatened power. In terms of relative power capabilities, the disparities between the PRC and the two superpowers will not change dramatically in the near future. But new strategic and political problems and opportunities have developed for Peking in the early 1980s. Depending on their resolution, China could enjoy leverage and flexibility significantly greater than in the past, or it could encounter new pressures and uncertainties. What would these changes imply for the future of the international strategic system? To consider this issue further, we need to turn to the present status and likely directions of Sino-American and Sino-Soviet relations.

In the early 1980s, China's relations with the United States again assumed an unsteady course. The realization of full diplomatic ties in late 1978 and the burgeoning economic, governmental, and institutional dealings between the two countries created high expectations and even euphoria about the prospects for Sino-American relations. These remarkable breakthroughs also extended to informal security ties: The U.S. secretary of defense and his Chinese counterpart exchanged visits in the first half of 1980, helping lay the basis for the possible transfer of U.S. defense technology to the PRC and for the initiation of limited strategic cooperation on matters of common concern to the United States and China.

Leaders in Peking defined U.S.-China security relations in terms of a coalition, not an alliance. The United States and China could undertake parallel, mutually supportive actions, but without either country's being called on to engage in higher levels of security

collaboration. Formal security ties were too binding: They restricted Chinese freedom of action and, even worse, threatened to embroil Peking in a Soviet-American confrontation, whether or not the Chinese judged their own security interests at risk. But even though the Sino-American relationship in no sense constituted an alliance, it nonetheless represented a major international breakthrough. An informal security coalition between the United States and China, further facilitated by the close economic and political ties of both states with Japan, loomed as a serious possibility, with the goal of restraining provocative Soviet actions in Asia.

Such expectations proved exaggerated or premature. China has instead assumed a far more assertive and independent political posture; moreover, it again describes the United States as a "hegemonic superpower" that threatens rather than guarantees international peace and stability. Although a Sino-American security dialogue continues, it is now substantially diminished, with uncertain prospects in the immediate future for higher level strategic ties between Washington and Peking.

Numerous hypotheses have been offered to explain these major departures from Chinese policy of the late 1970s. The prevailing view is that China's unhappiness with Reagan Administration policy toward Taiwan led Peking to reevaluate the possibilities (at least in the near term) for expanding ties with Washington, including the further institutionalization of a Sino-American anti-Soviet united front. There is considerable support for this interpretation, yet it does not offer a fully persuasive explanation for Chinese behavior. A number of additional factors placed serious limits on the further development of Sino-American security ties. In retrospect, the late 1970s are better viewed as a transitional period in Chinese policy than as a fundamental and enduring realignment. Bold steps may have been needed to shake China loose from its previous complacency, but they did not offer a realistic basis for a long-term strategic course.

Several recurring concerns in PRC security strategy stand out as even more pivotal issues than Taiwan. China's abiding suspicions about alliances with states far more powerful than itself continued to argue against open-ended security arrangements with either superpower. A

"never again" mentality thus pervades China's foreign policy: Its experience in the 1950s had left Peking perpetually suspicious of excessive dependence on a major external power. Although it may have to provide initial assurances to the United States that its dealings with the West were of a long-term, strategic nature, Peking appears to have anticipated that inescapable differences in national power and security needs would limit Sino-American cooperation. In Peking's view, the United States, as the far more powerful partner, would inevitably seek to take advantage of China's weakness and vulnerability, and thus could not be expected to support a genuine commitment to "a strong and secure China."<sup>4</sup>

Such an inevitability seems to have taken place even sooner than many anticipated. The election of the Reagan administration, and its adoption of a staunchly anti-Soviet orientation, appeared to portend an accelerated pace of Sino-American security dealings. Yet the new leadership in Washington expressed unease about overly close ties with a major Communist power, no matter how anti-Soviet its rhetoric. At the same time, the PRC judged the Reagan administration disrespectful or even contemptuous of past Sino-American understandings over Taiwan. Possible transfers of various "dual use" technologies were also blocked or impeded, suggesting to China that the United States did not seriously intend to facilitate China's modernization, especially if to do so might strengthen the PRC militarily. In the view of leaders in Peking, these and related developments suggested that America's commitments were feigned rather than real and that the United States, in effect, had yet to decide whether China was friend or foe. China's perception of parallel strategic interests--and its willingness to call for accelerated Sino-American security cooperation--diminished just as rapidly as it had developed.

In a manner reminiscent of the disintegration of the Sino-Soviet alliance, China again cast itself as the disadvantaged, aggrieved, and manipulated junior partner. But in a certain sense China was

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<sup>4</sup>The United States first expressed such a commitment to the Chinese during Zbigniew Brzezinski's visit to China in May 1978. See President Carter's instructions to Brzezinski in Brzezinski, *Power and Principle--Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1983, pp. 551-555.

responsible for its own anxieties. In justifying its ties with the United States, China had insisted that (1) the Soviet threat was global in nature but increasingly oriented toward Asia and the Third World; (2) no single nation--and especially not China--had the capability to face Soviet power alone; and (3) China was acutely vulnerable and in urgent need of external assistance. From a U.S. perspective, China had presented itself as the needier, more expectant partner in the U.S.-China relationship. The PRC's characterization of its own contribution to countering Soviet power and assisting American needs was more negative than positive: Peking kept large numbers of Soviet and Vietnamese forces committed against China that would otherwise be available for use elsewhere; it did not oppose and tacitly supported the U.S. political and military presence in East Asia; and it would not undertake a destabilizing regional role.

In China's view, however, all these contributions were vital to U.S. policy goals and global needs. From this perspective, the United States no longer had the capability to compete singlehandedly against the Soviet Union; thus it sought supplementary or surrogate forces to augment its own power. The United States would therefore be extremely forthcoming in its aid to China, including the long-deferred goal of military modernization. Peking was convinced that the United States could not take China for granted, because America needed China more than China need America.

Although the Reagan administration clearly shared Peking's concern about Soviet political and military assertiveness, its prevailing beliefs differed significantly from those voiced in Peking. In the U.S. view, a Soviet military buildup had continued unabated and unanswered for a decade and a half. The most urgent need was to undertake a comparable effort to augment U.S. military capabilities in a manner that could challenge this perceived Soviet military advantage in peacetime, and defeat the Soviet Union in wartime. China's role, therefore, while not marginal, was less than vital: China was far too technologically backward to do more than tie down Soviet forces that would otherwise be available for employment on other fronts. Since China was neither able nor willing to join the United States in a putative wartime alliance against the Soviet Union, its strategic value to the United States was

only modest. Moreover, the Chinese were perceived as far too vulnerable to Soviet encirclement and intimidation to take issue with U.S. policy, even if key U.S. policies (notably, those toward Taiwan) offended Chinese sensibilities and interests. Thus the Reagan Administration took a position diametrically opposed to that of Peking: the United States *could* take China for granted, for China needed America more than America needed China.

Such differences contained all the ingredients for a test of wills between Washington and Peking. China's enduring suspicions about the motivations of a far more powerful benefactor were fueled by a perception of the United States as a resurgently hegemonic power that acted in disregard of the sensibilities and concerns of its newfound coalition partner. The singleminded U.S. preoccupation with challenging the Soviet Union in military terms downplayed what the Chinese saw as a far more pressing concern: forging a credible *peacetime* coalition that would restrain provocative Soviet actions in various areas of the Third World vulnerable to coercion, subversion, or penetration. In the absence of such efforts, security ties between the U.S. and China lacked credibility, purpose, and consistent direction.

Under such circumstances, the strategic underpinning of U.S.-Chinese relations was placed in considerable jeopardy. By 1982, China's leaders had concluded that their security interests were better served by standing somewhat apart from the United States than by being closely aligned with it. Although both Washington and Peking subsequently sought to repair the strains in their relations and avoid what threatened to become a serious rupture in their dealings, substantial suspicions and uncertainties had been generated on both sides. From China's perspective, good relations with the United States remained very important, especially if China were to benefit more fully in the areas of economic collaboration and technology transfer. But China's relative importance in U.S. global strategy had unquestionably diminished. Since the United States intended to confront the Soviet Union on a worldwide scale regardless of China's involvement or urging, Soviet anxieties would increasingly focus on combatting the U.S. military challenge, and China did not want to risk unnecessary embroilment in these superpower tensions. In addition, to the extent

that the Soviet Union was preoccupied by its larger rivalry with the United States, it would be far less concerned about Chinese power, and might even be prepared to deal more reasonably with leaders in Peking. All these calculations had major implications for what arguably remained China's most compelling security concern--to counter the Soviet Union's long-term political and military challenge in Asia.

Leaders in Peking understand that the Sino-Soviet relationship represents a far more intractable problem than their disagreements and difficulties with the United States. Unlike the Soviet Union, the United States no longer poses a frontal military challenge to the PRC. The USSR maintains large, sophisticated, well-equipped military forces along a still partially contested Sino-Soviet border. A strengthening across the entire spectrum of Soviet military capabilities--ground forces, air forces, naval power, as well as strategic nuclear weaponry--has now been sustained for more than a decade. East Asia no longer represents a peripheral military front for the Soviet military leadership, a fact formalized by the establishment of an independent theater command in the region in late 1978. A long-term Soviet goal has been achieved at enormous expense: The Soviet Union has become a credible two-front power, with the capacity to pressure, coerce, and encircle China from the north, east, or south.

The pivotal strategic issue for Peking, therefore, is to define the most effective means of reducing or at least "managing" the long-term Soviet geopolitical threat to China. In addition to the predominantly military option, three other broad possibilities exist: aligning with another power or group of powers to offset Soviet military strength, diverting or preoccupying Moscow in areas of marginal strategic concern to China, or seeking a partial political accommodation with Moscow that specifies and restricts the areas of political conflict and crisis. The prospects for all four possibilities depend on the leadership assessment of two additional questions: the opportunities for mobilizing political and military forces to counter the growth of Soviet power, and the nature and severity of the Soviet challenge to China.

Such broad issues are not susceptible to easy or definitive judgments. It seems evident that the Chinese assessment of Soviet power and the degree of threat it posed to China have repeatedly been affected

by the PRC's broader foreign policy posture. For example, the heightened prospects late in the 1970s for an anti-Soviet united front argued for a more threatening depiction of Soviet political and military goals, although it also accorded with actual trends at that time. More recently, with China far less certain about both the propriety and the opportunity for collaboration with the United States, a more benign assessment of Soviet strategy has developed, but in the absence of any compelling evidence of change or redirection in the Soviet geopolitical challenge to China.

By its own actions and words, however, China has tried to preserve the possibility of some degree of accommodation with the USSR. Even at the high point of expectations in the West for an anti-Soviet united front, the Chinese sought to convey to Moscow both the limits and the possibilities inherent in such political arrangements. China never asserted that it intended to use its informal alliance with the West to engage in a frontal military confrontation with Moscow. As noted earlier, a united front was intended principally to deter the Soviet Union, not to provoke it. By avoiding any major Sino-Soviet crisis or confrontation while at the same time expressing a continued willingness to improve Sino-Soviet bilateral ties when time and circumstances are more appropriate, China has thus left open the possibility of a less antagonistic Sino-Soviet future.

This prospect nevertheless depends critically on Soviet behavior. For all the foreboding talk of a relentlessly expansionist Soviet Union that regularly emanated from Peking during the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the Chinese also made it clear that they understood the limits of Soviet power. Some Chinese have long argued that Soviet capabilities could not match Moscow's presumed hegemonic ambitions, and that the USSR (like the United States before it) would inevitably face an agonizing reappraisal of its external commitments and goals. In this view, Soviet military power embodies weakness as well as strength. A major Soviet troop commitment along the Chinese border without commensurate political or military gains; growing restiveness in Eastern Europe necessitating an enormous military effort; major aid commitments to Cuba and Vietnam; a global strategic and naval competition with the United States likely to accelerate in coming years; and a bothersome (if not overly costly or



risky) hot war in Afghanistan--none of these obligations and complications lend great confidence about the future security of the Soviet state.

When Soviet domestic vulnerabilities are added to this picture, Moscow's long-term prospects appear even less promising. An aged and ossified leadership structure; a continued decline in economic growth; military expenditures well in excess of 10 percent of the gross national product; serious ethnic tensions, even within the armed forces; and diminished access to Western economic and technological assistance--none of them offered grounds for much optimism. Nor do these considerations guarantee that the Soviet Union will act in a restrained or circumspect manner; rather, they make the costs and complications of additional Soviet expansion all too apparent. Numerous Chinese observers, therefore, see Moscow as an increasingly beleaguered if not enfeebled power, and certainly not an all-powerful military machine embarked on global conquest. Under such circumstances, there seems even less reason to worry about a direct Soviet military threat to China. Chinese strategic analysts have long argued that Soviet power is principally directed against regions, countries, and strategic locations far more vulnerable to penetration and subjugation than the PRC. Since the early 1970s, for example, spokesmen in Peking have consistently asserted that the Soviet Union is unwilling to incur the costs and risks of an attack on China, whether aimed at punishment or occupation of substantial amounts of Chinese territory.

Yet these expressions of long-term optimism leave unaddressed the broader Soviet geopolitical challenge to China. For more than a decade, a fundamental Soviet security objective was to encircle China from different geographic points, thereby compelling Peking to accommodate to Soviet pressure. The Soviet political and military presence to the north (in Mongolia and along the Sino-Soviet border), to the east (the Soviet Pacific Fleet), to the south (in Vietnam), and to the west (in Afghanistan) reflected a broad, underlying Soviet commitment to the containment of China not easily subject to change. There was, as well, a major commitment of Soviet strategic nuclear capabilities targeted against China which has been steadily augmented in recent years. All these factors placed Sino-Soviet relations in a much more worrisome

light, all the more so in the context of uncertain Sino-American relations.

Thus, the future of Sino-Soviet relations will depend critically on the resiliency of the positions and policies adopted by both Moscow and Peking. Both sides benefit by the avoidance of military hostilities along the Sino-Soviet border. The unresolved issue is whether such conditions will lead to a substantive change in relations. Changes in atmospherics were dramatically evident during 1982 and 1983: there were far lower levels of polemical exchanges, higher levels of trade, an increasing flow of official and unofficial visits between the two countries, and the initiation of consultations on interstate relations, held at the vice ministerial level. China's willingness to enter into such consultations--in the absence of any serious shifts in the Soviet political and military posture in Asia--suggested that Peking saw these discussions in a context different from previous negotiations. Whereas previous talks (including those initiated after the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979) seemed intended largely as tension management devices, the consultations begun in 1982 over the broader range of interstate relations were a visible demonstration of China's long-term objective of foreign policy independence toward both Moscow and Washington. Yet China may have been making a virtue out of necessity: In the absence of stable Sino-American relations, Peking may have had no reasonable alternative but to seek separate understandings with Moscow.

The principal Soviet goal in these discussions is to decouple bilateral Sino-Soviet relations from the broader geopolitical rivalry between Peking and Moscow. In the months prior to his death, Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev conveyed such an interest, while still remaining unspecific on the more concrete measures that the USSR was prepared to undertake to diminish Sino-Soviet hostilities. These overtures gained new momentum with Yuri Andropov's accession to power in November 1982, when the presence of the Chinese foreign minister in Moscow fueled expectations of further movement. In the view of Soviet officials, China should not lock itself into a rigidly anti-Soviet stance that benefitted neither Moscow nor Peking but only the United States--the principal beneficiary of unrelenting hostility between the two countries. If China were to convey a reasonable position in such

talks and did not inject what Moscow saw as extraneous "third party issues," then the USSR would reciprocate these gestures.

In the Chinese view, however, these third party issues--Vietnam, Mongolia, and Afghanistan--concern nothing less than Moscow's long-term objectives throughout Asia, and toward China. The PRC, therefore, argues that no significant improvement in Sino-Soviet relations can occur in the absence of serious attention to these issues. China's long-term security goal remains unchanged: to diminish (if not eliminate) Soviet political and military pressure directed against China, thereby achieving correct if not necessarily amicable relations with both superpowers. Such an accomplishment would represent a major departure and breakthrough in China's international relations and further solidify a PRC position independent of both the Soviet Union and the United States.

Peking offers a substantial inducement for Soviet leaders to negotiate seriously: a commitment on China's part no longer to oppose reflexively every Soviet action and policy. At the same time, the Chinese have refrained from entering into extensive security collaboration with the West, even less any collaboration driven largely by an anti-Soviet design. The Chinese view these actions as serious concessions to the Soviet Union that demonstrate Peking's interest in more than tactical adjustments in its relations with Moscow. By posing their opposition to "Soviet hegemonism" as part of an overall strategy that also opposes "American hegemonism," the Chinese hope to persuade Moscow of the real opportunity for a serious breakthrough in Sino-Soviet relations while still not precluding a continued dialogue with Washington.

It seems doubtful, however, that the Chinese will be able to sustain indefinitely the perception of such an independent stance if meaningful Soviet concessions are not forthcoming on one or more key issues. Improvements in the atmospherics of interstate relations can likely be sustained, since they help keep Sino-Soviet tensions at a more manageable level. More far reaching accommodation, however, depends on Moscow's willingness to reduce its military and political pressure around China's borders.

Such an accommodation, if it did occur, would pose a direct challenge to the security interests of the West. Depending on the possible context and terms of such a potential accommodation, the United States would be likely to disassociate itself further from high-level political consultations with Peking, unless any Sino-Soviet understandings were to proceed in tandem with Chinese efforts to again improve their relations with the United States. A partial accommodation between Moscow and Peking might also lead to a heightened U.S. effort to improve its relations with the Soviet Union. Although all such possibilities are admittedly somewhat conjectural, they illustrate how Chinese dealings with the Soviet Union will affect not only Sino-Soviet relations, but Soviet-American relations, as well.

For the present, however, the Chinese seem to entertain few illusions about the likelihood of significant change in the near-term future in Soviet policy objectives in Asia. Despite the superficial equivalence in Chinese assertions about a world of two "hegemonic superpowers," leaders in Peking understand that their far more enduring security problems concern the Soviet Union, not the United States. Thus, any major departures in Sino-Soviet relations in the absence of clear shifts in Soviet political-military behavior toward China would violate one of the cardinal principles of Chinese strategy. Prevailing sentiment in Peking continues to insist that no significant accommodation in Sino-Soviet relations is possible without a reduction and redirection of the long-term Soviet threat to China. To do more in the absence of such change would reveal Chinese weakness and vulnerability to external pressure, now increased in Soviet eyes because of the uncertainties in Sino-American relations.

#### **ASSESSING PEKING'S STRATEGIC ROLE: DOES CHINA REALLY MATTER?**

Where does China fit within the global strategic balance of the 1980s? How important is China likely to prove in the evolution of the international strategic system? In key respects, strategic significance is in the eye of the beholder. Judgments about the importance of China's international role vary widely. Among many smaller states

(especially those in Asia), the importance attributed to China by the superpowers is a source of both bemusement and concern. Although few dispute China's power potential, the modest levels of China's economic accomplishments--coupled with the rigidities of centralized economic planning and stultifying bureaucratic control--makes the PRC at best a dubious candidate for major power status. China's repeated inability to sustain a consistent political and economic course bespeaks a political system without an effective, long-term strategy. China is large, backward, and enjoys only the trappings and symbols of major power standing, not the reality. Absent China's capability to affect relations between and among Peking, Washington, and Moscow, China would be little more than the world's most populous society--a largely agrarian economy with neither the capability nor the inclination to exert significant influence on the direction of world politics.

Numerous states thus look upon China with a mixture of denigration and envy. They fail to attach any particular significance to China's strategic role. In this view, China's supposed power reflects a common preoccupation of the two superpowers with the PRC's political and strategic directions, and Peking's own careful cultivation of its international image. Yet they are mystified by the attention lavished upon the Chinese. Even among the disparate nations of the Third World, it is increasingly inappropriate to describe China as either a model or a putative leader. The composite perception of China among both intermediate and smaller powers is highly unflattering: China enjoys the privileges and deference accorded a major world power, without possessing the requisite national capabilities and accomplishments that appear to define the term.

Thus, China clearly occupies an anomalous position among the world's major powers. Viewed in relation to many conventional measures of national power, China does not appear particularly important. China has a *per capita* gross national product of \$410, placing it among the world's less developed states. Its most compelling problems are internal rather than external: China must rigorously control its population and find a means to feed, clothe, and house its one billion people. Despite its seeming commonality with the states of the Third World, however, by circumstances, history, achievement, and intention

China is very much a factor in the global power competition. China has tested and deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, and few world capitals receive as careful scrutiny and diplomatic attention as does Peking. These observations underscore one of the paradoxes of power in the contemporary international system: China exerts international influence well beyond its material or military strength. How has it achieved such results?

China's military power is the first critical underpinning of Peking's international influence. The Chinese see no reasonable alternative to the acquisition of both conventional and nuclear weaponry. In absolute terms, China's ground forces are the world's largest; only the Soviet Union and the United States possess more ships and planes. The PRC's nuclear arsenal, though small and in most respects severely dated by superpower standards, remains a vital national priority. Even more important, China has shown little hesitancy or equivocation in employing armed force when the risks of inaction were judged greater than the dangers of action. From the Korean intervention in 1950 to the attack on northern Vietnam in 1979, the Chinese leadership proved ready to use force to defend China's national boundaries, assert claims to disputed territories, demonstrate political will, and deter adversaries contemplating the use of force against China.

Peking's record as a military power over the past three decades has gained China an international importance that it would otherwise not possess. Even in those instances when China's military performance has been judged suspect (most notably in China's border war against Vietnam), China's willingness to employ arms and sustain major losses has conferred substantial credibility elsewhere. This is most dramatically evident in other Asian capitals. Although outmoded and vulnerable by the standards of the major industrial societies, China's military forces are forbiddingly large and are thus paid careful heed. To those smaller states that live in the shadow of Chinese power, it matters little that China's weapons are based largely on defense technologies of the late 1950s. The perception and credibility of power are pivotal, and in this respect China has very much succeeded: No nation on the PRC's periphery dares contemplate military action without

serious consideration of its political and military repercussions vis-a-vis China.

Even the superpowers convey a grudging but real respect for China's military fortitude. In the Korean conflict, China suffered grievous manpower losses against U.S. forces, but the PRC's intervention had a chastening effect on American political and military leaders alike. Fifteen years later, the credibility of Chinese threats to intervene in the Vietnam conflict silenced the advocates of involvement of U.S. ground forces in North Vietnam. Along the Sino-Soviet border, Soviet military planners understand the potential implications of major military hostilities initiated against Chinese forces. The prospect of a prolonged war of attrition against the PRC--not to mention potential nuclear retaliation by the Chinese--helps deter the possibility of a full-scale Sino-Soviet war. China's investment in arms has thus yielded considerable results, no matter what the costs.

China's nuclear program has had a particularly potent effect on the perception of Chinese power. The very distinctiveness of such weapons--few possess them and none dare use them--places the nuclear nations in a category apart from all others. Among the states of the nonindustrialized world, China alone has tested such weapons and developed means to deliver them. In May 1980, China entered into an even more exclusive group when it successfully tested a missile of full intercontinental range, thereby providing China with a theoretical capability to reach major targets in the United States as well as the Soviet Union. In October 1982, China achieved an additional breakthrough with the successful undersea launching of a sea-based ballistic missile. Both efforts provide potent assurance that Chinese strategic power will not be slighted nor ignored. It has helped make China a credible world power, especially in the eyes of the two nuclear superpowers. Perhaps not accidentally, the five states unambiguously engaged in nuclear weapons deployment are also the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. No matter how unsuitable nuclear capabilities might be for use in a direct military sense, they confer prestige and international recognition, and they constitute a vivid demarcation of power in the international system.

Yet alternative paths to international power exist, along which China does not fare nearly as well. For example, a nation's level of technological and economic advancement may offer far better grounds for assessing national power than does its military might. Scientific, entrepreneurial, and management skills are judged essential to a nation's stability, prosperity, and internal cohesion and effectiveness. Japan, which offers preeminent example of such a society, lacks almost all the natural resources needed for national self-sufficiency; its military strength is exceedingly modest when compared to its economic power; and its global political role remains tentative, equivocal, and understated. Yet Japan's prodigious economic accomplishments during the postwar era confer upon it an undeniable legitimacy and stature.

The Chinese are in no position to make comparable arguments. In the past China's pursuit of self-reliance was praised as the only viable path to autonomy and national dignity for Third World states. The Chinese now recognize that this goal was elevated to unthinking dogma, severely impeding China's economic and technological transformation. Two decades of internal political upheaval ill served the vital goals of economic growth, technological self-sufficiency, and scientific advancement. As a result, China today remains woefully short of the educational, scientific, and entrepreneurial talent needed to compete effectively in the international economic system. If there is a power of example that attaches to economic advancement, China is far from achieving it. Indeed, these arguments readily lead to the view that China lacks the assets and skills that truly count in global politics. According to this perspective, China is better seen as a supplicant than a leader: It needs the developed world's help more than the developed world could possibly require its involvement and cooperation.

Despite these economic shortcomings, there is an additional belief in China's national power potential. By virtue of its size, population, and past greatness as a society and civilization, China assumes international importance regardless of its present deficiencies and shortcomings. Calculated allusions to "the one billion Chinese people" effectively convey this line of reasoning; no other society can make such a claim of imputed importance. China can thus proffer (or



withhold) its loyalties or affiliations as a source of power in its own right. Because of its size, its vast population, and its underutilized economic potential, China possesses international leverage beyond that of smaller, resource-poor societies. It is little wonder that China continues to represent a major asset in the global power competition, though this status is more in the realm of attributed power than usable capabilities.

Yet weapons, economic strength, and power potential alone cannot explain the imputed significance of China in a global power equation. If its strategic significance is judged modest and its economic performance has been at best mixed, this cannot account for the very considerable importance of China in the calculations of both Washington and Moscow, and the careful attention paid to it in other key world capitals. The answer lies in the fact that, notwithstanding its self-characterization as a threatened and aggrieved state, China has very shrewdly and even brazenly used its available political, economic, and military resources. Toward the superpowers, Peking's overall strategy has at various times comprised confrontation and armed conflict, partial accommodation, informal alignment, and a detachment bordering on disengagement, sometimes interposed with strident, angry rhetoric. As a result, China becomes all things to all nations, with many left uncertain and even anxious about its long-term intentions and directions.

To be sure, such an indeterminate strategy has at times entailed substantial political and military risks. Yet the same strategy has lent considerable credibility to China's position as an emergent major power. China has often acted in defiance of the preferences or demands of both superpowers; at other times it has behaved far differently from what others expect. Despite its seeming vulnerability, China has not proven pliant or yielding toward either Moscow or Washington. Here as well, China has maintained its credibility and resiliency under pressure; Peking's leaders have established a record of refusing to be taken for granted. For all these reasons, China has assumed a singular international position, both as a participant in many of the central political and military conflicts in the postwar era and also as a state that resists easy political or ideological categorization.

China, therefore, has achieved a "swing" value in international strategic politics, since no other state--large or small--has ever occupied as many diverse positions and alignments in relation to the superpowers. Anxieties about Chinese power compelled the United States and subsequently the Soviet Union to deploy major military forces on a second front in Asia--no doubt a somewhat dubious accomplishment from the perspective of Chinese security, but one that testifies to China's centrality in Soviet and American calculations about war and peace. In considerable measure, the burdens and complications of such a second front ultimately compelled America's strategic reassessment in Asia and towards China. The Chinese may ultimately hope for a comparable reappraisal on the part of the Soviet Union.

Both Washington and Moscow understand the unique role that China has assumed in relation to the Soviet-American rivalry. Peking's position and alignment--and the defense requirements China generated for both superpowers--have frequently had a critical influence on the polarization of the international system, and on the relative defense burden each superpower has had to bear. Indeed, in a certain sense China must be judged a candidate superpower in its own right--not in imitation or emulation of either the Soviet Union or the United States, but as a reflection of Peking's unique position in global politics. In a more long-term perspective, China represents a political and strategic force too significant to be regarded as an adjunct to either Moscow or Washington or simply an intermediate power. The key issues nonetheless remain: How can such strategic independence best be used to China's advantage? And what does it suggest about the long-term directions of Chinese power in the international system?

Few answers have even been suggested for these question, nor is there any evidence that the Chinese have given them much thought. The Chinese, to be sure, have been a central participant in the global diffusion of political, economic, and military power. This is not meant to suggest that the Chinese will soon acquire capabilities analogous to those of either Moscow or Washington. The hallmarks of what Liddell Hart termed the "acquisitive approach" to grand strategy are well beyond China's technological and economic reach.<sup>5</sup> China still lacks extensive

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<sup>5</sup>B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1954, Chapter 22.

military forces deployed abroad on a more or less permanent basis; major alliance commitments and obligations; large, ocean-going navies; and the capacity for military intervention over great distances. China will increasingly, if selectively, acquire military power that testifies to its strategic independence, especially in nuclear weaponry and in naval forces large and sophisticated enough to assert control of China's claimed territorial waters. Yet a genuinely expansive conception of national security is a "to be or not to be" question that does not require conclusive assessment in the foreseeable future.

The critical issue for the remainder of the 1980s, therefore, will remain a variant of what has long preoccupied China's foreign policy: defining a political role in Asia that is autonomous from both superpowers, yet not in fundamental conflict with the interests of either. It is still far from certain whether this goal is feasible or realistic. China must try to persuade both Moscow and Washington of its legitimacy as a political-military power, with Peking unconstrained by extensive formal obligations to either the United States or the Soviet Union. Both superpowers, moreover, maintain a vital stake in the evolution of the Asia-Pacific region, so the Chinese can hardly expect either state to diminish its attention to the region.

In addition, numerous uncertainties attach to a more independent conception of Chinese power. Either Soviet or American policy or both could move in directions far more threatening or alluring to Chinese interests, and such movement might lead some within the Chinese leadership to barter away long sought strategic gains out of momentary need or opportunity. China's long-term modernization strategy might not generate its anticipated results, leaving China even more economically and militarily vulnerable and hence insufficiently credible within global or Asian politics. Alternatively, the prodigious tasks associated with China's internal reconstruction might prove so consuming of leadership attention and energy that China will seek a partial disengagement from the global great power rivalries.

None of these uncertainties, however, alter an inescapable fact: China has no alternative but to work within the existing international system. The devolution of international power over the past several

decades has undoubtedly been to China's advantage. The time has long since passed when any single state (or coalition of states) could exercise its power with impunity against Peking. Indeed, both Washington and Moscow recognize the need to garner additional political support for their increasingly costly and complicated global rivalry. China has thus become the object more of superpower solicitation than of criticism, coercion, or isolation.

The Chinese therefore understand that their long-term interests are not well served by an overly antagonistic or highly polarized international situation. Yet Asia has been the principal battleground of the postwar era, and China has never shrunk from using its military power, even if doing so has heightened tensions. In an ironic way, China's participation in these conflicts demonstrated China's centrality to the global strategic balance. Having established the credibility of their power in the midst of repeated crises and conflicts, China's leaders will hopefully now devote their energies to making certain that Asia's future does not resemble its past. The larger test for the Chinese will be to develop a political conception befitting Peking's role as a central participant in Asia's political stability and economic well-being. This remains a major challenge that leaders in China as well as elsewhere have barely begun to consider.

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